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S E R M O N

Preached at the F U N E R A L

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B A P T I S T

EARL of Gainsborough.

A P R I L 18, 1751.

By JOHN SKYNNER, A. M. Fellow of
St. JOHN's College, Cambridge; and Chaplain
to the Countess of GAINSBOROUGH.

Preach'd and Publish'd at the Request of his Lordship's Family.

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T O T H E

Countess of Gainsborough.

M A D A M,

I Beg leave to present the following Discourse to your Ladyship, as a memorial of the just esteem in which I held the truly noble person who occasioned it. I persuade myself you will receive with candor an attempt to do honour to those virtues, which you have always imitated : and I should add too, which you will never cease to lament, if I were not sensible of
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of the influence which reason and religion
maintain over every affection of your heart.
'That your Family may long enjoy the inestimable
benefit of your guidance and example, is the
unfeigned wish of,

M A D A M,

Your Ladyship's

obliged, and

obedient Servant,

JOHN SKYNNER.

PSALM xxxix. Verse 8: *old translation*

*And now, Lord, what is my hope?
truely my hope is even in thee.*

THERE is not, perhaps, an higher gratification to a generous and enlarged mind, than giving "honour to whom honour is due:" and there is no time that this tribute ought to be more pure and unmixed with flattery, than when it is paid on these awful and solemn occasions. But in celebrating the virtues of that honourable person, the loss of whom sits so heavy on our hearts; I am less apprehensive of incurring the censure of adulation, than of adding strength and poignancy to that grief, which it is my duty to sooth and moderate. For can I speak of his tenderness to his family, without encreasing the tears of some of those among this assembly, who have so often been witnesses of all its happy endearments? Can I enlarge upon his friendly and hospitable temper, without a-

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wakening the bitter remembrance of those hours, which some of you have enjoyed with him in free and unblemished conversation? an enjoyment now, alas, never to be repeated! Can I mention his benign treatment of his domestics, without heightening their concern for the loss of so kind and generous a master? and how shall I add sorrow to the afflicted heart of the poor, the orphan, and the widow, whilst I remind them of the beneficent hand, that dispensed their daily bread!

But as there is no season in which the heart is more susceptible of religious impressions, than when it labours under the weight of severe afflictions; so there are no consolations of equal strength and efficacy with those, which are administered by religion. Whilst we feel therefore the full pressure of our present irreparable loss, let each of us endeavour to allay the anguish of his heart by the same pious confidence, which supported the royal Psalmist, when he broke out into that pathetic exclamation: "And now, " Lord, what is my hope? truly my hope is " even in thee."

No reflection less powerful than this, could enable us to pay with any decency of sorrow, these our last solemn offices to departed merit:
and

and if our hope were not fixed on the God of all consolation, who could follow to his grave the tender husband, the affectionate father, and the generous friend, without bursting into the wildest transports of despair ?

It was in these tender relations, that the person, whom we now deplore, particularly distinguished the valuable qualities of his heart ; and the grief of this sorrowful assembly will bear witness, that few have equalled, none could excell him in the several duties of those different connections. His heart was naturally tender, as his sentiments were rationally refined. This diffused a remarkable delicacy over his actions towards the first and principal object of his affection : and there was all the politeness, as well as tenderness, in his whole conjugal deportment, which is necessary to secure to that sacred intercourse a firm and uninterrupted happiness. It was the study of his life to instill into the amiable partner of it, every accomplishment that can adorn the female mind : and how well he succeeded, every one (I believe) is sensible, but the person, on whom his care was so successfully bestowed.

In regard to his children ; it was his constant rule to act under the influence of that excellent

maxim ;—“ pudore & liberalitate liberos retinere
 “ fatius esse quám metu.” Accordingly, he gained
 that establishment in their hearts by affection,
 which is ill supported by mere authority : and
 he knew how to render himself their companion,
 without any danger of their forgetting that he
 was their father. How careful was he to assist
 the tender openings of their reason, and to culti-
 vate in their hearts the noblest and most generous
 sentiments ? To avoid every mean deviation from
 rectitude and honour ; to be the same both in
 publick and private ; and to fear nothing so much
 as the reproaches of a wounded conscience, were
 the great precepts he was perpetually endeavour-
 ing to instill into their tender minds.—May they
 ever remember his paternal care with the senti-
 ments they ought ! and may those virtuous seeds
 which he thus early sowed in their hearts, grow
 up to the happiest maturity ! may they be strik-
 ing instances, how far the best instruction, when
 operating upon the best dispositions, will advance
 the human virtues ! and may they ever receive
 that approbation, which is alone an honour to
 receive ; the approbation of the wise and good !

There yet remains a very amiable part of this
 lamented person's domestic character, which
 deserves to be particularly pointed out ; his be-
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haviour to his servants. He preserved their obedience without severity ; and gained their affections without lessening his authority. His heart was too great to behave towards them with that insolence of rank, which is the certain characteristic of low minds in high stations. As they were his fellow-creatures, he remembered they were his equals ; but without forgetting however the distance which Providence had placed between them and him in the necessary subordinations of society. A dignity thus tempered with humanity was attended with suitable effects ; and one shall seldom find in the houses of the great such a number of servants so decent, so orderly, so observant, so well disposed. I could dwell on lamenting with them the great loss they have sustained, were they not already but too deeply sensible of its pressure. I may justly however mention it as a proof how easy,—nay—how happy he made their servitude ; that there are scarce any of them new to his family, and that most of them have grown up under his roof, and never knew any other master than him, for whom they now mingle their tears with that general stream, which his death has occasioned.

His benevolence was not confined within the narrow limits of his family, his friends, and acquaintance ;

quaintance ; but spread itself over the whole circle of human existence. He had a heart susceptible of the tenderest impressions, and every instance of distress was the object of his enlarged compassion. He scorned the poor ambition of being applauded for his wit, or his parts, by insulting over a weaker understanding, or less lively imagination : and he would not oppress the modesty of the present, or injure the virtues of the absent, to call forth the loudest peals of mirth, that unfeeling sprightliness ever raised. On the contrary he would endeavour to conceal those blemishes in others, which he could not correct, and to extenuate, rather than magnify, the faults he saw.

His beneficence was refined, uniform, and unbounded. It arose not from ostentation, few delighted more in concealed acts of bounty : it resulted from a thorough conviction of the duties of humanity, from a sense of the various casualties of life, and from the overflowings of a natural compassion. There is a certain insolence of liberality, which doubles the force of fortune's blows, and tears open those wounds it pretends to heal : but he relieved, without offending the delicacy of distress ; and rendered poverty rather sensible of the heart that pity'd, than even of the hand which

which bestowed. It was thus that he received,
 “ the blessing of those who were ready to perish,
 “ and caused the widows heart to sing for joy.”

The hospitality of his temper was extremely remarkable, and well worthy that diffusive spirit of benevolence, which was once the general (and would to God it had been the constant) characteristic of our British gentry and nobles. No guest ever entered his mansion who was not received with all the warmth of the most generous welcome; and many can witness, that they seldom, if ever, knew any one return from thence within the time limited for his departure. It was indeed the great and enlarged pleasure of the deceased, to see his house perpetually filled with his friends, and to detain them in it by all the polite and manly amusements, that could engage them to prolong their visit. He was perfectly well qualify'd for so generous a purpose, and strictly adhered in all his actions to that lesson, which Plato prescribed to his scholars, of sacrificing to the graces. His skill in musick, painting, and poetry; his knowledge in the principal arts and embellishments of elegant life; to which I may add a very judicious acquaintance with history, and the sciences, rendered him at all times capable of furnishing out a refined entertainment both

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for himself, and others, of the same improved and cultivated taste.

It is no wonder that his heart, thus humanized by the most liberal accomplishments of our nature, should be strongly susceptible of the social impressions, should be so soon melted into compassion, and easily disposed both to forgive, and forget, offences. And tho' he had a very remarkable, and perhaps (as he would frequently himself lament) a too quick sensibility of temper ; yet it was his peculiar merit that he endeavoured to suppress every rising emotion of anger : and he made it an inflexible rule of his conduct, never to revive the remembrance of an injury which he had once forgiven.

But to speak of him in the more extensive relations of society, and as he stood in that high rank in which the privileges of his birth had placed him ; he was a true Briton : zealously devoted to the liberties of his country, and consequently most inviolable in his attachments to the present royal family. He well knew that no other principles, than those upon which that illustrious house is placed on this throne, could subsist with the general rights of mankind, or answer the plain and undisputed ends of government.

ment. Accordingly he distinguished himself in contributing to the support of those principles, when they were lately in so much danger of being subverted by that lawless torrent, which broke in upon this kingdom : and the services, which he then performed in maintenance of our civil and religious rights, were honoured with the express thanks (as they justly merited) of his royal master.

Having thus very imperfectly, but very sincerely, sketched the general out-lines of those excellent qualities, which I know much better, alas ! how to regret, than how to delineate in all their just and amiable proportions ; I would not appear so unworthily partial, as to insinuate that he was exempt from those failings, which are incident to humanity. I do not however stand here to point out his imperfections, but to propose his virtues to your imitation : and I leave the former ungrateful task to those malignant spirits, who take pleasure in contemplating the little spots, that will unavoidably adhere to the brightest characters ; at the same time that they are insensible of the superiour lustre, with which they are surrounded. Suffer me in the meanwhile to endeavour to raise in our minds such reflections, as may enable us to support our severe

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loss with proper resignation, and even teach us to improve it to our common advantage.

For the first of these purposes it imports us to remember, that the issues of life and death are in the hands of the great Sovereign of the universe; and that as He alone knows the proper time, and manner, of removing his creatures from one state of existence into another; whatever he determines as to those great changes must upon the whole, and all things considered, be best both for the living and for the dead. We are assured by an authority that can not deceive, that even "The hairs of our head are all numbered:" and that "not a sparrow is forgotten before God." These are strong expressions and big with consolation, to all who labour under those afflicting circumstances which now oppress our hearts. They teach us, that the great Father of mercies extends his care over all his creatures, and that no being is placed so low in the scale of existence, as to be inferior to the influence of his unbounded providence. If a sparrow therefore falls not without the Father, much more we may be sure a being, of so exalted a nature as man: and if it is the will of God, that brings us all to the ground; it must be the wisdom, as well as the duty, of man, to acquiesce in that sacred will.

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It is indeed so much the happiness of our nature to do so, that we are directed to implore the grace of that pious submission in the daily petitions we send up to heaven : and there is no disposition of mind more pregnant with every seed of Christian virtues, than to be able to say in unfeigned resignation to the measures of Providence, " Not my will, O Lord, but thine be done ;" as there is none, which can more strongly fortify us against all those numberless accidents, to which our lives are hourly exposed. This disposition however is by no means inconsistent with that sensibility of temper, which is the great ornament of human nature : and which is generally the indication, as it is always the ingredient, of a noble mind. Neither reason nor religion forbid our tears : they only command us to moderate them. Neither reason nor religion prohibit us from lamenting our friends : they only inspire us with sentiments that will temper the bitterness of their loss, and blunt the edge of the sharpest affliction. In a word, both reason and religion suggest to us the great remedy, I have endeavoured to apply to our present wound, in teaching a perfect resignation to the decrees of Heaven.

Let it be some consolation to us likewise under our sudden and unexpected loss, that had the

valuable Person, whom we now deplore, extended his life as far as we might fondly have wished; perhaps his declining years might have bent down with the weight of innumerable sorrows and infirmities, from which he is now for ever secured. He might have wept over the loss of his nearest and most dear relations and friends; and seen them one after another torn from his aged and helpless arms. In fine, after having survived all his enjoyments, he might at last have survived even himself. And can any condition be imagined more miserable, than to have out-lived all the comforts of existence; and when near the end of our voyage, and even in sight of our shore, to find ourselves alone and unassisted amidst the general wreck of every valuable endearment?

The next and last consideration I proposed to offer, was some general reflections, that might tend to improve the sad occasion of our present meeting to our common advantage.

And here the lamented memorial of mortality, which now lies extended before us, can not but suggest to our thoughts the very precarious tenure by which we hold all our possessions. It was but a few days ago, that the deceased was
promising

promising himself the happiness he should enjoy with a whole family just revived to his embraces * ; that he was in the midst of those enjoyments which render life truly desirable ; in the vigour of manhood ; in the full relish and possession of the most exquisite gratifications, (those I mean which arise from communicating and receiving domestic happiness ;) honoured with titles, and blessed with ease ; yet an hour, a few moments, were sufficient to extinguish in him all sense of these happy privileges, and separate him for ever from the sons of men.

We see by the instance which we are now deploring, that no human advantages can arrest the arm of Death. Health and prosperity must no less submit to its force, than poverty and pain. It is with the lives of men as with the course of rivers : some traverse indeed a greater extent, and pass thro' more pleasing scenes than others, but all equally tend to the same abyss, and are blended at last in one common receptacle.

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* At the time of the late Lord Gainsborough's sudden death, his family were just recovering from a most dangerous illness, under which they had long laboured ; a recovery entirely owing, under Providence, to the great care and skill of the very worthy and judicious Dr. Wallis of Stamford.

“ The heart of the wife ” (as is observed by the wisest of men) “ is in the house of mourning : ” and undoubtedly there are no precepts more useful and important, than those we may learn from that dark school of affliction. They will teach us to soften the foolish insolence of pride ; to extinguish the immoderate flame of ambition ; to quench the insatiable thirst of avarice ; and, in one word, to place our affections where they can never be disappointed, by setting them principally on things above.

The man indeed who preserves an habitual recollection of that mortality, to which himself and all things that surround him are equally and inevitably subject, can not be easily betrayed into any very notorious deviations from the main rules of his duty. He can not but sit loose to the pleasures of the world, when he remembers how soon, and how suddenly, he may be removed from them, or they from him. He can not surely be tempted to defame his neighbour ; to betray his trust ; to falsify his promise, or sate his revenge ; when he bears in mind how very speedily even the longest duration of those advantages must end, which he proposes to himself from such horrid violations of truth, integrity, and humanity. He can not, in short, be impatient
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under the kind chastisements of Providence, when he is mindful that he is hourly hastening to that place, where “the weary shall be at rest, and where all tears shall be for ever wiped away.”

And now what remains, but that with all the tender sensibility of pious sorrow we pay our last duties to the relicts before us. And tho’ we shall follow a cold, lifeless lump of clay, let us not forget those illustrious virtues, with which it was so lately animated and enlivened. Let us remember those tender affections that softened his disposition; those elegant graces, that adorn’d his mind; and a thousand engaging acts that were perpetually flowing from the generosity of his heart, and the liberality of his hand.—Let us remember these, and suffer them to make such deep impressions on our minds, as may indelibly remain there to our common improvement in the social virtues.

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